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SUBJECT: PARTING THOUGHTS ON BURMA

Classified By: COM Carmen Martinez for Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

11. (C) After three years as Chief of Mission in Rangoon, I offer a few parting perspectives on the feared and reclusive generals who rule Burma; our continuing efforts to mitigate the threats posed by the military regime to our national interests, to regional stability, and to the people of Burma; and the necessity of continuing support for the Burmese people in their desperate quest for democracy, human rights, and a better standard of living - denied to them for over forty years.

12. (C) There is no happy tale of progress achieved during these past three years and no portents of short-term positive change. My realistic assessment is that the prospect for meaningful improvement in the near future is extremely low. The overall political situation has progressively deteriorated, over the past two years in particular, and recent signs indicate that a further deterioration is likely.

#### THE GENERALS

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13. (C) The twelve generals who comprise the SPDC are retreating into their collective shell, recalling former dictator New Win's experiment with self-imposed isolation. I see this trend partially as a response to international pressure, but the retreat also reflects the regime's renewed attention to unfinished domestic business, namely dealing with the question of power sharing with the country's ethnic minorities that has lingered unresolved since independence.

14. (C) Ironically, the generals have erected new barriers at precisely the same time that former adversaries - namely Thailand, India, and China - have embraced engagement with the regime for their own perceived national interests. These relationships provide a significant boost to the regime's quest for legitimacy and also counter the effects of increased U.S.-led sanctions. However, we see very few signs that the SPDC has much to offer in return to those who court them. An abundant flow of natural resources and an uneasy calm along common borders are strong "rewards" for engagement, but the neighboring states are not finding that engagement and access guarantees any influence on the behavior of the brutally illogical generals.

15. (C) As the SPDC retreats, the regime's disregard and open disdain for the UN system and the international community grows. It has been a year and a half since the SPDC allowed the UNSYG's Special Envoy Razali to visit and nearly two years since UN human rights Rapporteur Pinheiro was allowed to enter the country. In the interim, world leaders and international organizations such as the UNSYG, the UNGA, the UNCHR, the ILO, FATF, and even the UNSC have continued to press the SPDC, unsuccessfully, for significant political and economic change.

16. (C) The regime responds to the pressures by stonewalling or with vitriol, threatening retaliation, decrying interference, blaming "superpowers" and "foreign destructive elements," and, increasingly, just simply digging in and affecting disinterest. The top SPDC leaders earlier this year snubbed the ILO's senior delegation and there are growing signs that the regime may either boot the ILO out altogether, or simply quit the organization. And few here have forgotten that UN human rights Rapporteur Pinheiro was treated to an electronic eavesdropping while he interviewed a political prisoner during one of his last visits. Like the ILO delegation, Pinheiro cut short his visit and left thoroughly disgusted with the regime.

17. (C) The regime is also tightening the noose around UN agencies and international NGOs, imposing new restrictions on travel, programs, and staffing. Surveillance of diplomats is becoming ever more blatant, especially on those who have any contact with opposition figures, and foreign missions and visitors are facing increasing delays and difficulties in obtaining entry visas and resident permits.

18. (C) Many observers point to the October 2004 ouster of

former military intelligence czar (and original member of the 1988 junta), Khin Nyunt, as the source of the current retreat. The hypothesis being that the disgraced Prime Minister was a moderate or a reformer who lost out to the hard-liners in a power struggle.

19. (C) We disagree. General Khin Nyunt was a hard-liner, albeit a more polished and approachable one. He was a pragmatist who cultivated foreign countries and a purported dialogue with the opposition simply as a means to mollify the international community and perpetuate the regime's absolute control. His ouster was a consolidation, not simply of hard-liners, but of the top generals who time and again demonstrate a remarkable ability to eat their own in order to preserve a carefully constructed system of patronage and power sharing. Khin Nyunt made himself a tempting morsel - fattening on his patronage network and the power of his intelligence apparatus - and the SPDC maw swallowed him up just as it has others before him.

#### THE OPPOSITION

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10. (C) The main thrust of our work here has been supporting a legitimate democracy movement, one that has a historical claim to govern and a national following. Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi and her supporters have for years represented Burma's only hopes for a brighter future. Indeed, my first year in Rangoon included dozens of meetings and discussions with ASSK and her senior advisors and I had every hope that she could achieve a meaningful dialogue with the regime and edge Burma closer to national reconciliation.

11. (C) Sadly, the regime finally figured out how to rid itself of its most vexing problem, the National League for Democracy and the pro-democracy movement: detain and isolate its courageous leaders; harass and repress the rank and file membership to such a degree that thousands of people are consumed, and cowed, by pure fear; and then simply ignore the politically beleaguered and economically desperate individuals that remain.

12. (C) If ASSK were to gain her freedom in the next few months and was allowed some modicum of freedom to operate as an active political player, she could re-energize her movement and use her popularity to get a partial grip on the reigns of political power. However, the region's muted response to the SPDC's May 2003 attack on ASSK and her subsequent detention, coupled with the lack of internal protest or unrest by the population, encouraged the generals to step up their campaign against the democracy movement. The opposition leaders who remain are elderly and infirm, governed by Burmese traditions of strict hierarchical decision-making, dismissive of empowering the movement's youth, and lack the ability to formulate a political strategy based on changing conditions. They are remarkably courageous - but the little that they are able or willing to do makes almost no difference to the regime or to the dreams and lives of their supporters.

13. (C) That the SPDC now ignores (in the NLD's own words) ASSK and the NLD is significant. The generals have always lambasted their enemies - real or conjured - as a means of justifying their own existence and policies: "Only the Tatmadaw (the armed forces) is capable of keeping Burma from imploding." For years, the regime devoted considerable energy to depicting the NLD and other pro-democrats as treacherous villains and to launching vicious personal attacks, verbal and physical, against ASSK and other opposition leaders. The ironic result was that such attention made ASSK and the NLD important political players with whom the generals had to contend.

14. (C) The generals, however, have moved on to other "enemies" (ethnic minorities, exiled activists, and the United States are the prime targets lately). The regime (while continuing intense monitoring and harassment of NLD members and supporters as well as pro-democracy ethnic groups) has taken a public posture that treats the pro-democracy movement as a non-entity and therefore of no real threat. What remains after two years of systematically persecuting pro-democracy forces is a drab, ramshackle NLD party office in Rangoon and a once vibrant nationwide movement forced so far underground that there are only a few overt signs it still exists.

#### WHAT WE NEED TO DO HERE

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15. (C) Following the dismantling of Khin Nyunt's MI network, the GOB has placed on the back burner our annual (since 1993) joint opium yield survey and our WWII remains recovery operations. The indefinite lapse in these activities (which we do not view as an anti-American gesture, per se, but rather another indication of the regime's "retreat") not only creates more obstacles to our counternarcotics and humanitarian policy objectives, but also reduces considerably

our exposure to senior military leaders and our access to sensitive locations in Burma's isolated interior.

¶16. (C) We also have little authority to conduct many USG-funded programs inside Burma. There is a perception on the part of exile groups and their supporters that democracy and human rights programming is not worthy or feasible in this country. I disagree. There is a phenomenal thirst among Burma's diverse populations for what the United States has to offer. In close consultation with a variety of opposition groups (and at their specific behest), this post has repeatedly proposed creative public diplomacy initiatives to support this thirst for information on human rights and transitional democracy, but we have been unable to obtain substantial funding support for these proposals.

¶17. (C) Our modest public diplomacy programs and publications, for example, continue to be wildly popular. Our American Center in Rangoon (which houses the best, and one of the only, libraries in the country) draws up to 1,000 visitors a week and has 10,000 members on its rolls. This is the kind of old-fashioned outreach that helped turn the tide in Eastern Europe and it could make a difference here if the Department was willing (at very low cost), to expand the program via an American Center branch in Mandalay as post has repeatedly proposed for almost three years. Over recent years tens of millions of ESF and HA funds have been expended on Burmese refugees and exiles in Thailand, a tiny percentage of the Burmese population that has very low prospects for returning to Burma anytime soon. Their cause is noble and our support for them is laudatory, but the heart of the matter lies with the 55 million Burmese who remain under the direct yoke of the SPDC.

WE'RE HERE TO STAY

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¶18. (C) The presence of an active U.S. mission in Rangoon is essential. Having an embassy here allows us to monitor the abuses and misdeeds of the opaque and isolated military regime. Our presence, coupled with our extensive bilateral sanctions, our support of UN and INGO programs, and our ability to garner support from the EU and other countries, may discourage even more egregious behavior on the part of the generals or at least make sure someone shines a light on their evil deeds.

¶19. (C) Without the presence of the U.S. and other key missions, and in the continued absence of a free press, the regime could quite possibly cause or allow the death of ASSK; "disappear" all political prisoners; revive wholesale, rather than more localized, use of state-sanctioned forced labor; "neutralize" several minority groups, including the Rohingya Muslims; more actively pursue even cozier relationships with other pariah states such as North Korea; more aggressively seek acquisition of high-tech and perhaps nuclear weapons; and increasingly ignore UN conventions and international standards.

¶20. (C) The United States, supported by a significant presence in Burma, is also in a sound position (though not necessarily a position of influence with the regime) to lead the international community (most of which would prefer to ignore the "Burma problem"), in pursuit of democracy and respect for human rights and to elicit a minimum of responsible behavior from the GOB on some regional security issues related to terrorism, narcotics, and HIV/AIDs.

¶21. (C) Perhaps most importantly, the United States provides a voice and a source of hope to the vast majority of the Burmese population who oppose authoritarian rule and are inspired by core U.S. values of good governance and respect for the rule of law. They gain strength from the presence of our mission, which helps to fuel their patient optimism and endurance. We should be under no illusion that USG policies alone will effect short-term regime change. However, although the military regime is becoming more impenetrable and reclusive than ever, their grip on power is not sustainable forever. The United States needs to be here, on the ground, when changes come.

¶22. (C) "No American interests here, be they anti-narcotics, economic or human rights can be satisfied for as long as the present regime rules. Within understandable limits, i.e., nothing smacking of direct intervention, our policy should be directed at promoting political change. For as long as the situation remains volatile, United States behavior toward Burma should be geared at strengthening the morale and perseverance of pro-democracy forces." These words were penned upon the departure in 1990 of the last Chief of Mission to bear the title of U.S. Ambassador to Burma. Fifteen years later there is nothing to gainsay his assessment.  
Martinez